

# High Plains News

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## \$200K on the table as county leaders weigh business, job growth

BY ALEX BARTA  
High Plains News

The Thomas County Economic Development Alliance (TCEDA) Board met Wednesday, March 18, at Center Pivot Brewery in Colby. The business opened this past December in part to help from the TCEDA and the Small Business Development Council of Kansas.

Center Point Brewery owners Ericka and Steve Nicholson spoke to the board about their relationship with the TCEDA.

“We applied for the Network Kansas Fund which comes through the Thomas County Economic Development Alliance. They had seen our financial package and our business plan,” said Ericka Nicholson. “The Thomas County Economic Development Alliance connected us with the Patterson foundation and because our loan package met the qualifications we received a grant for \$16,000 to offset the high interest rate at the time that we were borrowing.”

Center Pivot Brewery hosted the TCEDA to let board members see the results of their collective efforts.

Among the key discussion items was the City of Colby sales tax fund, which continues to serve as an important local funding source for development efforts. Board members also reviewed the current status of outstanding loans, reflecting ongoing investments in area businesses and projects.

In his Director’s report, Economic Development



From left: Mike Woofter, Ken Christiansen, Christy Preston, Pat Mallory, Janet Christiansen, Lee Leiker, Christina Jaeger, Brad Flipse, Steve Nicholson. *Courtesy photo*

Director Vernon Hurd reported that last week’s Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge featured 66 students presenting 42 business concepts, with one student qualifying for state competition and several

others expected to seek wildcard entries for the April 28–29 event at Kansas State University.

“We are working with Kansas Legal Services to put on a legal services workshop for

the four-county area around Thomas County, with the goal of providing assistance to people who need records expunged so they can get their driver’s licenses back,” said Hurd. “In that four-county

area, there are roughly 850 people who qualify to have minor offenses expunged from their records. If those are expunged, they can regain their driver’s licenses, which is especially important for us here in Thomas County.”

Hurd said the organization is working to hire an intern for website updates; he added that representatives will attend an upcoming economic development forum hosted by the Dane G. Hansen Foundation. Staff are also preparing to begin the budgeting process next month, researching a retail attraction proposal process, and continuing discussions with two prospective businesses.

Under old business, the board revisited the allocation of \$200,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. These dollars remain a significant tool for supporting economic recovery and local development projects, and discussion continues on how best to deploy the remaining funds.

The board also considered a loan application from Peak & Prairie LLC, presented by Kyle and Toni Lindberg. Loan applications are a regular part of TCEDA’s efforts to support business expansion and entrepreneurship in Thomas County.

In addition, members discussed the upcoming Colby Chamber of Commerce Banquet scheduled for April 10, a key community event that brings together local businesses and leaders.

## Library celebrates 100 years

BY ALEX BARTA  
HIGH PLAINS NEWS

Pioneer Memorial Library marked a major milestone, celebrating 100 years of service to the community with a series of events that brought together more than 1,300 attendees across two days.

The celebration included a formal gala on Friday, March 13, which drew 304 people, followed by a family-friendly anniversary event the next day that welcomed 1,048 attendees.

Library Director Melany Wilks said the turnout and the overall success of the celebration exceeded expectations.

“It turned out fabulous as far as I’m concerned,” said Wilks. “I’m just thrilled.”

For Wilks, who has spent 18 years at the library, the centennial carries deep personal

meaning.

“The centennial means that we have been doing the work to reach all segments of our society,” she said. “We take people from birth to the end of life. We literally do, and for 100 years of that; I think that’s quite an accomplishment. I’m thrilled to have been here 18 of those years.”

Saturday’s “Fun For All” event transformed the library grounds into a lively hub of activity. Attendees received commemorative T-shirts, enjoyed games, and took part in a variety of interactive experiences.

Highlights included an arcade bus, oversized yard games, puzzles, trivia contests, and a “pie walk.” A whipped cream game — where participants risked

see **100 YEARS**, page 9



**First-ever state champion** At the 2026 USA Wrestling Kansas State Championships, Maggie Holle of Atwood Kids delivered a historic performance in the 135-pound division, capturing the state title with a fall over Paiton Talmadge in 2:12. The Atwood-Rawlins junior became the program’s first-ever state champion while adding to an already remarkable résumé. She is also the first three-time state qualifier in program history, the first two-time state medalist (finishing third at 125 last year and second at 130 this year), and the first girl from Atwood to compete in a state finals match. Holle also surpassed 100 career wins, solidifying her place as one of the most accomplished wrestlers in school history. Darbi Jones finished as the runner-up, earning a strong second-place finish for Atwood.

## Kansas lawmakers push for tougher penalties on cattle, grain thieves

BY ALEX BARTA  
HIGH PLAINS NEWS

Kansas lawmakers are taking steps to crack down on agricultural theft, advancing two bills that target crimes involving livestock, equipment, grain and hay.

House Bill 2413 and House Bill 2422 come as producers and law enforcement raise concerns about the financial impact of theft in rural communities. Supporters say the measures would update state law and give prosecutors stronger tools to handle crimes that can hit farm operations especially hard.

HB 2413 focuses on livestock and farm equipment and has already passed both the Kansas House and Senate with

strong bipartisan support. The bill would make theft of livestock or agricultural machinery — referred to in statute as “implements of husbandry” — a severity level 5, nonperson felony, regardless of how much the stolen property is worth.

Right now, theft charges in Kansas are typically based on dollar value. Lawmakers backing the bill say that approach doesn’t always reflect the real impact on producers, where even a single theft can disrupt operations and lead to significant losses.

The measure is now awaiting final procedural steps before heading to the governor.

Meanwhile, HB 2422 targets theft of major agricultural commodities and

is also nearing the finish line. The bill would create a severity level 6, nonperson felony for stealing large quantities of grain, including wheat, corn, soybeans and sorghum. It was later expanded to include hay, with theft of at least 20,000 pounds meeting the same threshold.

The bill recently moved into a conference committee after the Kansas Senate agreed to work out differences with the House and appointed conferees to negotiate the final version. That step typically signals lawmakers are ironing out final details before sending the bill back for approval in both chambers.

Like HB 2413, this proposal moves away from value-based penalties and instead focuses on the type and volume

of what’s stolen. Supporters say that better reflects how bulk commodities are handled — and how costly it can be when they’re taken.

Backers of both bills say the goal is simple: deter theft and make it easier to prosecute. In a state where agriculture plays such a central role, they argue stronger protections are essential for keeping rural economies stable.

If both measures clear their remaining steps and are signed by the governor, they would mark a notable shift in how Kansas handles agricultural theft — and send a clear message that these crimes will carry tougher consequences.

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